

Sketch

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The Touch of Genius

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Abstract

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That Touch of Genius

by Bob Boston

TONY got off the bus and began to walk the four blocks to Mrs. Gould's house. It was usually a short walk, his long, slim legs rolling smoothly over the concrete. But today he walked heavily, weighted down by the memory of the scene with Judy's mother. Each step of his scuffed, once-black loafers sent a jolt up his back and into his head, where it set off a large Chinese gong.

His delicate hands were hard knots of tension in the pockets of his light-blue jacket, and his dark eyes that could pick up the exact degree of a curve or the tiniest detail of an expression were dull and sightless. He walked automatically, his feet adjusting themselves to irregularities in the sidewalk, stepping over cracks and the raised slabs that they remembered from the many other times they had taken him on this four-block journey.

The talk had been short. Judy's mother had seen to that. Bangbangbang! Her words had come like machine-gun bullets, piercing him, tearing him apart.

"Of course, I don't want to *force* you into this, Anthony, but I must confess that I can see no other solution but marriage. Any other arrangement we might make will be most embarrassing to Judith, not to mention to Mr. Hollis and myself, who, after all, do have a certain position to live up to, although that really isn't the issue here."

Sitting in that black leather chair like a Supreme Court Justice. Pointing that deadly mouth and letting fly. Bangbangbang! Cold, steel-blue eyes pointing too, running him through.

And Mr. Hollis sitting there, pink, pudgy, and scared to death of her. That weak little smile on his weak little face. Nodding as she talked about how an artist couldn't possibly support their daughter. She had once thought that it was so glamorous to have her daughter dating an artist. Of course, she probably felt snubbed when he stopped seeing Judy.

His feet left the concrete and started up a lane of white crushed rock. He wondered for the hundredth time how Mrs.

Gould managed to keep the rocks so immaculate. He pictured the gardener going up and down the lane with a bucket of whitewash and a brush, meticulously picking up each rock, painting it, and putting it back in its place.

The lane was long and winding, and the neatly pruned trees and shrubs that lined it formed a green wall at each turn, so that he could see only about twenty feet ahead at any time. When Mrs. Gould had first described the place he'd had a vision of a horror-movie setting, but instead it was sunny and pleasant and deliciously luxuriant.

The house sprang out at him before he expected it, as always. He would turn a corner, expecting to see another green wall, and there the house would be on its smooth, unwrinkled blanket of grass, giving the impression of a fleet, beautiful bird caught in the act of taking off, its clean, modern lines reaching for the sky.

His step was lighter as he crossed the remaining distance, and the Chinese gong subsided to a cymbal. His finger had hardly touched the bell when the maid opened the door, her small mouth already pursed to begin the crisply-pronounced sentences that were her usual greeting.

"Mrs. Gould is in the studio, Mr. Braccio. She is expecting you."

He climbed the stairs that led to the glass-enclosed studio, the only room that was not on the ground level. She was studying his unfinished canvas as he walked in, her slim figure and deep brown hair concealing an age he estimated to be at least fifteen years more than his own.

"Why, Tony dear, where have you been? I've been aching to see how this will turn out. It's going so well now."

He didn't bother to tell her what had delayed him. It would be a little hard to explain. Instead he began to talk about the painting as he put on his smock and selected his brushes.

The painting was almost finished. It was the face of an old woman he had sketched one day on the bus. It was a study in contrasts, with her drab, worn face standing out starkly against the bright background of life seen through the window behind her. The only work that remained to be done was the delicate and detailed job of shading the wom-

an's hands and clothing. He worked silently, and Mrs. Gould sat on a chair behind him, watching the painting grow to completion.

He could feel her presence, and it bothered him today. He wondered why. He had never felt uncomfortable with her before. Well, only the first time he met her. But then she seemed so remote, living in an entirely different world of wealth and fame, while he was in a five-dollar-a-week room, sketching in writing pencil on tablet paper because he couldn't afford anything better.

Then she had found him, somehow, and invited him to bring his work to her house so she could see it all. That had started it. How long ago was it? Only two years? It seemed much longer. He had learned so much. So many trips to this house. So many paintings. And she had brought it all to him, this woman that had become his most severe critic and his most zealous booster.

He had known for a long time that he was something special to her. Of course, she patronized many artists, but she seemed to give him more than the others. He had the use of her own studio. She had arranged for him to meet most of the good artists in her world, and her influence alone had sold most of his canvasses so far.

It was really too bad that she couldn't have gone farther as an artist herself; she loved it so much and had studied it so long. Still, she admitted it herself, she just didn't have that touch of genius that made a great artist.

His eyes and hands worked by themselves on the painting, his eyes visualizing and his hands creating the vision until it was finished. He stepped back from the easel, and she was at his side, her arm around his waist.

"What do you think of it? Does it come across all right?" His dark face was furrowed with a look of hopeful concern. She looked at the canvas in silence, and he knew she was studying every line, every delicate shading.

Her voice was husky and warm when she finally spoke. "Why Tony, that's beautiful. It's the best you've ever done." Her arm tightened. "You're getting more than good."

He blushed and smiled gratefully. But her arm bothered him. He must be getting jumpy today. It seemed to be im-

prisoning him, drawing him uncomfortably to her. He slipped away from her and set the canvas in another corner of the studio to dry. When he turned around she had an odd look in her eyes, a look of hurt and uncertainty. But her full, red lips smiled and said, "How about some coffee? I had Anna make some while you were working."

"Suits me fine. Coffee is the staff of life, you know." He said it a little too happily to cover up the discomfort he felt. "I'll be down as soon as I clean out the brushes."

There was probably nothing wrong here. He was just on edge because of the mess with Judy. Shouldn't have gotten mixed up with her in the first place; but, damn it, he hadn't asked her to come up to his apartment that night. It was her own idea. She knew what she wanted.

When he went downstairs he found Mrs. Gould seated in the breakfast nook, pouring coffee. He laughed. "Benefactor, when are you going to start acting like a millionairess? Don't you know you're not supposed to serve guests in the kitchen?" He slid onto the bench opposite her, and his knees bumped into hers. She did not move, but she smiled at him, gazing steadily and earnestly at his face. He reddened and sat sideways in the seat. She laughed.

"Oh, Tony. you're embarrassed with me today. Why?"

"It's not every day that I have coffee with such a charming woman, you know." It was the wrong thing to say. Now *she* looked embarrassed. His face became more flushed, and he tried to cover up his confusion by drinking the coffee. It was hot, and he gasped as it seared its way down his throat. Tears came to his eyes, and he coughed.

"Oh, dear, I forgot to warn you." She was on her feet instantly, running to the cupboard for a glass. She filled it with cold water and rushed back to him, sliding onto the bench beside him as she put the water on the table. Her leg pressed warmly against his, and she patted his back gently.

What had come over her? She'd never acted this way before. . . or had she? Now that he thought of it there were many times when she had gone out of her way to touch him, but he'd never noticed it. He didn't like it. He didn't like thinking this way about her, but what could he do?

He drank some of the water and sat passively for a few

moments. Her hand finally stopped patting, and she stood up, smoothing her dress self-consciously. He saw his opportunity and stood up also.

"Well, thanks for the coffee. I guess I'd better be going now. I have some studying to do at home."

Her deep brown eyes slowly met his with a look of unashamed pleading. "Won't you stay for lunch? I'll be eating soon."

"No, really. I'm seeing Dr. Jonas at the Art Institute this afternoon, and I'd like to return the book he loaned me, so I'd better get back and finish reading it." He knew the excuse was weak, and could tell that she knew it was only an excuse.

She dropped her gaze to the floor. "When will you be coming out again?"

"Oh, I'll drop in tomorrow. The painting should be dry enough by that time."

She walked him to the door, and he could feel her eyes on him as he started back down the drive.

She was on his mind all the way home. It bothered him, this injection of a personal aspect into their relationship. She had been the patroness, that was all. She had loved art and her art institute. It had made her seem impersonal to him. The only emotion they had shared for two years was a love of art, or so he had thought.

He crushed his curly, black hair against the window of the lumbering bus, watching the pedestrians move by as though they were standing still on a treadmill. He let his eyes go out of focus, and the people became a formless parade of colors.

He could see now that it had been that way from the day they had met. Every time he had done something particularly good she had been that way. But why? He rubbed one paint-smeared hand along the sharp line of his jaw. She seemed to be living his paintings, in a way. She was as satisfied as if she had painted them herself.

He sat up and said, "God!" making the woman across the aisle raise a questioning eyebrow. He was Mrs. Gould's genius, that touch of genius she had never had. And she loved him because she was seeing her own ambitions realized

in his art. He settled back in the seat with a look of new-found responsibility on his face.

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When he reached his apartment building, Judy's familiar white Porsche convertible was parked at the entrance. He opened the door and slid in beside her.

"What are you doing here, Judy?" His voice was flat and cold.

"Oh, Tony," She turned her tear-moistened face toward him, "I just couldn't bear the way Mother talked to you this morning. I had to come and see you."

"Your mother laid it on the line all right." He didn't trust her when she cried.

"But Daddy and I talked with her after you left. We've got it all arranged. You won't even have to give up your art. Daddy. . ."

"What do you mean, give up my art?"

"Well, Mother said it was obvious that you couldn't support a wife and child on the money you make by painting. She said that you would have to get some practical job before we could get married."

"Just what kind of practical job do you have in mind?"

She took his hand. "Oh, Tony, don't be that way. Daddy and I have it all arranged so that you can work in the art department of the store, and you can still do your own painting at home. See? Isn't that just perfect?"

The art department of the store! Stacking furniture in a window. Setting up blank-staring mannikins. Art! He nodded his head. What was the use of telling her? She wouldn't understand anyway.

She started the car, put it in gear, and moved out into the street.

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, I thought it might be nice to go to some little place for lunch and then drive out in the country."

That was just like her. She usually did what she wanted without asking for his approval. But it didn't sound like a bad idea. He could use a change of scenery.

They went to an intimate little restaurant on the outskirts of town for lunch. Judy paid the check, because he had

spent the last of his money on bus fare. Then they drove out into the country on a gravel road, the little Porsche bouncing roughly over the ruts.

They didn't talk much, although he made a feeble attempt at conversation at the start of the drive. After a few words on the blueness of the sky and the freshness of the air she lapsed into silence and drove.

She liked to drive. She liked to drive fast. Tony had almost become accustomed to the way she drove when he had stopped dating her, but he still tensed up occasionally when she took a corner too fast or barely squeezed around another car when she was passing. She seemed to know he was tense. She liked to make him hold onto the seat now and then.

Today he didn't care. He wanted the sensation of speed, the high whine of the motor, and the solid feeling of riding in a hard-sprung car. He sat relaxed in the bucket seat, watching the countryside move by, and made mental notes of the places he'd like to sketch sometime. There were too many of them, and he eventually gave up the effort; but he resolved to drive along this road by himself with his sketchpad.

The motor screamed as Judy downshifted into a turn. She put the car into a power skid, but it felt solid and secure under him. He watched the way she drove, her tanned hands gripping the wheel firmly, sure of themselves in their control over the car. Her hair streamed back in the wind, and her lips were pressed into a thin, red line as she concentrated on the road ahead.

It was funny how she just missed being beautiful. He had analyzed her face many times as though he were considering her as the subject of a portrait, but he was still puzzled by it. Her features were abrupt, almost masculine, but they had a classic beauty in themselves, a beauty like the unfeminine features which the Greek goddesses possessed. There was something else, though, perhaps a hardness of expression that made her lose the beauty she could have had. Her face was outstanding, but only because of the power and dominance of her personality.

Still, her outstanding features had been enough to draw him to her when they had first met a year ago. She had seemed so different then, so intelligent and sensitive. She still

showed occasional flashes of sensitivity when it suited her purpose, but she was usually just as she had been earlier, doing what she wanted and to hell with everybody else.

Her mother must have looked like that thirty years ago, because the resemblance was still strong, even to the blond hair, although in Mrs. Hollis' case it was obviously not real. Judy's dad probably knew what he was talking about this morning when he had talked to Tony before Mrs. Hollis had burst into the room.

The poor little guy was scared to death, but he had enough courage to say it, anyway, as he stood there with his soft, wet hand gripping Tony's as though it would convey his thoughts directly.

"Don't do it, boy. Don't let her get her hooks into you." He stared into Tony's eyes imploringly. "Yes, she's my daughter, but I know her, son. She'll do the same thing for you that her mother did for me." He dropped his arms, inviting Tony's scorn. "Look at me, Tony. I'm not proud of what I've become." His receding chin began to quiver, and he opened his mouth to say something else, but Mrs. Hollis was suddenly there, already talking as she entered the room. He gave Tony one last, imploring look and shuffled over to the desk to sit down. Yes, he had known what he was talking about. He'd lived with it for thirty years.

Tony went back to the study of the countryside as it flashed by. It was still early enough in the year for the grass to be green instead of burned brown, as it would be later in the summer, but it was hot enough to make the wooded hillsides look cool and inviting.

"Wait, Judy! Stop the car!"

She hit the brakes, and the Porsche fishtailed on the loose gravel until it finally stopped.

"What's wrong?"

He realized that he had sounded too urgent. "Nothing's wrong, but there's a beautiful little cabin back there in that grove. Back the car up."

She shoved the gearshift into reverse, annoyance on her face. The car whined backwards until he stopped it by touching her arm and pointing.

"There. Isn't that a beautiful little place? Look at those weatherbeaten walls and the way the trees frame it. I'd like to paint that scene."

"It's just a beat-up old shack. Let's go." The car was already spitting gravel as she spoke, and he settled back in the seat once more. It was useless to try to stop her when she had started.

The rest of the afternoon was strained. He was tired of riding nowhere and tired of being with Judy. The monotonous whine of the motor and the rutty gravel roads became unbearable. He tired of trying to analyze Judy's character and finally attributed all her traits to the influences of her mother. He also gave up his study of the scenery and stared, as she did, at the road ahead. He was glad when it changed from gravel to concrete, and gladder still when it became the street in front of his apartment building.

"What are you doing tonight, Tony boy? Could I come up for a little while? After all . . ." She patted her stomach and winked at him.

"No, Judy, I. . . uh . . ." He sought desperately for an excuse. ". . . uh . . . I'm going to a lecture at the Institute with Mrs. Gould."

Her blue eyes became the steel knives her mother's had been that morning. "Damn Mrs. Gould. That shriveled-up old bitch." Her mouth widened in a cruel grimace. "Does she show you a good time, little protégé? They say widows are really good at it." She rammed the car into gear and looked at him with hatred in her cold eyes. "Remember, Mother's expecting you in the morning." She didn't wait for a reply, but gunned the car out into the street, making a taxi squeal its tires to avoid hitting her.

Mrs. Gould was in his apartment when Tony walked in. There were groceries on the table, and she was sitting on the couch, reading a book on the techniques and themes of Titian.

"Hi. What's going on here?"

She put down the book and stood up, a smile revealing her even, white teeth, and making her brown eyes sparkle. "We are having a party, my young protégé."

"What's the occasion? Did you make another million or something?" He tried to be flippant. He didn't want a repetition of the morning's discomfort.

"There are two occasions, really. One is this." She handed him a check.

"Six hundred dollars! For what?" He looked at her in disbelief.

"Well, look who signed it. That should give you a clue."

"Howard Arnold. He's that art dealer from New York that you introduced me to. But I didn't sell a painting to him."

"No, I did. He came to the house this afternoon, saw that new painting, and bought it on the spot."

"Man, that's great!" He laughed, kissed the check, and threw his arms in the air. "Howard Arnold! Six hundred dollars! That's great!"

"Now wait a minute. You haven't heard the best part yet. I got a letter this afternoon from Paul Lingl. He's opening a new art academy in Munich this fall. How would you like to study under him?"

He grabbed her wildly and danced around the room. "Oh, Benefactor, you're too much! Paul Lingl! Oh, man!" They were both laughing now and gasping for air. He collapsed onto the couch and waved the check in the air like a flag. Suddenly he realized that she was looking at him silently. She sat down on the couch beside him and clasped his free hand between both of hers.

"Tony, I know how much this means to you. Do you have any idea of what it means to me?" She searched his face hopefully.

He nodded slowly. Her hands were warm and tingling when she touched him. Her soft, brown hair had escaped from its usual sleek form during the wild dance, and it fell around her face to her shoulders.

"I want to go over with you, if you want me to. The academy won't open until the fall. We could have a real holiday until then. Italy, France, Germany, we could see it all."

He could see it all now. He was there, studying the work of the great masters. Leonardo, Michelangelo, the Sistine

Chapel, Rembrandt, Douanier Rousseau, The Louvre. He could see her now, too. She was more beautiful, more vibrant than he had ever realized. She understood him. She was sensitive and intelligent and youthful and . . .

He nodded again, returning fully the gaze of her dark eyes. "I'd like that. I'd really like to do that."

"Oh, Tony, I knew you would!" She kissed him, and he found that he was returning her kiss. Her body was firm and young in his arms, and her hair was as soft as it looked.

After she had gone, after the steaks and champagne and the childishly excited planning for the summer, he thought of Judy and the job her parents had arranged for him. He wouldn't let them stop him. They couldn't. After all, Judy was supposed to be a grown woman. She had taken chances before, he was sure of that. She should be prepared for what happens when a gamble backfires. And, anyway, there was a good chance that the child wasn't his. He hadn't been near Judy for three months and hadn't even heard from her until she called him to break the news. It wouldn't have happened in the first place if she hadn't been so free and easy that night.

And Carole . . . it sounded odd after two years of "Mrs. Gould". . . Carole could make him happy. He was her dream of success, her touch of genius. He had a real responsibility to her, too. He had to go on with his career. He couldn't let her down.

He turned out the light and tried to rationalize himself to sleep.

* * *

Judy met him at the door the next morning. "Our wedding announcement is in the paper this morning, baby." She laughed and kissed his cheek lightly.

"I haven't said I'll marry you yet, Judy." He was scared.

"Why, Tony, you know Mother always gives me what I want. She's had a private investigator checking up on you, dear, since you're going to be a member of the family." She smirked.

"What the hell are you getting at?" His voice was unsteady, breathy with fear and anger.

"Well, dear, he's found out everything about your affair with that nice Mrs. Gould. Now, you wouldn't want a scandalous rumor to ruin her art institute and her reputation, would you?"

"There hasn't been an affair!" He wanted to ram his fist into her swelling belly.

"Oh come on, Tony. You've been going to her house nearly every day for two years. What does that spell? You'd better come in and talk to Mother."

He followed her into the house.

Circe

by Julian Schmidt

40,000 thieves enraptured by
undulations of fine-spun jewel
wisps and a chrysallis of
nectar dreams —

flowing —

cirro-cumulus —

propriumque tuum —

as permeating mist irresistible
by evening

I can wait no longer
like 300 mirrors, incongruous,
twisting and breaking, the vision
crumbles in blackness —

swirling in an omnibus of
screaming fright and tingling sighs

but it is also there —

the awe of the unknown and
the seduction of the condemned

— whispers inaudibly —

dissolves body and soul
in mutual ecstasy